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ABSTRACT

This paper argues, using a feminist poststructuralist perspective, that second language acquisition (SLA) theorists have struggled to explore the relationship between the language learner and the social world because they do not question how structures of power in the social world impact on individual language learners and the opportunities they have to interact with target language speakers. It also reports on a study of the language learning experiences of five women immigrants to Canada. SLA theorists have failed to explore the extent to which sexism, racism, and elitism influence the kinds of opportunities second language learners have to practice the target language and how immigrant language learners are frequently marginalized by members of the target language community. The results of the case studies of immigrant women demonstrate that motivation, extroversion, and confidence are not fixed personality traits, but should be understood with reference to social relations of power that create the possibilities for language learners to speak. (Contains 17 references.) (MDM)

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LANGUAGE LEARNING, SOCIAL IDENTITY, and IMMIGRANT WOMEN

Bonny Norton Peirce

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1. THE PROBLEM: The Language Learner and the Social World

A major conundrum facing theorists of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is how to theorize the relationship between the individual language learner and larger social processes. In general, artificial distinctions have been drawn between the language learner and the language learning context. On the one hand, the "individual" is described with respect to a host of "affective" variables such as his or her motivation to learn a second language (Schumann, 1978; Krashen, 1981). The personality of the individual is described as introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited (H. D. Brown, 1980). It is assumed that the learner's attitudes towards the target language community determine how motivated the second language learner is (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), and levels of anxiety determine how much comprehensible input becomes cognitive "intake" (Krashen, 1981). The "social" on the other hand, refers to *group* differences between the language learner group and the target language group (Schumann, 1976). In this view, where there is congruence between the second language group and the target language group, the "social distance" between them is considered to be minimal, which in turn facilitates the "acculturation" of the second language group into the target language group, thus enhancing language learning.

Dichotomous distinctions between the language learner and social context have led to disagreements in the literature on the way affective variables interact with the larger social context. For example, while Krashen regards motivation as a variable independent of social context, Spolsky (1989) regards the two as inextricably intertwined. While Krashen draws distinctions between self-confidence, motivation and anxiety, Clement, Gardner, and Smythe (quoted in Spolsky, 1989) consider the latter two variables as a subset of the former. Krashen considers self-confidence as an intrinsic characteristic of the language learner while Gardner argues that self-confidence *arises* from positive experiences in the context of the second language: "self-confidence ... develops as a result of positive experiences in the context of the second language and serves to motivate individuals to learn the second language" (Gardner, 1985, p. 54).

Such disagreements in the literature should not be dismissed, as Gardner dismisses them, as "more superficial than real" (1989, p. 137). I suggest that this confusion arises because artificial distinctions are drawn between the individual and the social, which lead to arbitrary mapping of particular factors on either the individual or the social, with little rigorous justification. Although muted, there is an uneasy recognition by some SLA theorists that current theory of the relationship between the language learner and

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the social world is problematic. Scovel (1978) for example, has found that research on foreign language anxiety suffers from several ambiguities, and Gardner and MacIntyre (1993, p. 9) remain unconvinced of the relationship between "personality variables" and language achievement.

The central argument of this paper is that SLA theorists have struggled to theorize the relationship between the language learner and the social world because they do not question how structures of power in the social world impact on individual language learners and the opportunities they have to interact with target language speakers. They have not explored, for example, the extent to which sexism, racism, and elitism influence the kinds of opportunities second language learners have to practice the target language and how immigrant language learners are frequently marginalized by members of the target language community. In addition, they have often assumed that learners can be defined unproblematically as motivated or unmotivated, introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited, without considering that such affective factors are frequently socially constructed in inequitable relations of power, changing over time and space, and possibly coexisting in contradictory ways in a single individual.

In particular, I argue that notions of the "individual" and the language learner's "personality" in SLA theory need to be reconceptualised in a way that will problematize dichotomous distinctions between the learner and the language learning context. I take the position that SLA theory needs to develop a conception of the language learner as having a complex social identity that must be understood with reference to larger, and frequently inequitable social structures which are reproduced in day-to-day social interaction. In taking this position, I foreground the role of language as constitutive of and constituted by a language learner's social identity. It is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across different sites at different points in time, and it is through language that a person gains access to - or is denied access to - powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak (Heller, 1987). Thus language is not conceived of as a neutral medium of communication, but is understood with reference to its social meaning. I support these arguments with findings from a longitudinal case study of the language learning experiences of a group of immigrant women in Canada (Peirce, 1993).

2. THE THEORY: Weedon and Bourdieu

The social theory which informs my research and analysis is the feminist poststructuralist theory identified with the work of Weedon (1987) and the conception of language competence associated with the work of Bourdieu (1977). Their theories on social identity and "legitimate discourse", respectively, are productive for conceptualising the relationship between the language learner and the social world, and are highly relevant for current SLA theory. In addition, the conception of "investment" as opposed to "motivation" that I introduce in this paper may have explanatory potential in SLA theory. I will examine each of these theories in turn, and then turn to a description and analysis of my study.

2.1 Conceptualizing social identity

Three defining characteristics of social identity or "subjectivity", as drawn from Weedon, are particularly important for understanding the results of my research. First, Weedon (1987, p. 32) argues, the terms "subject" and "subjectivity" signify a different conception of the individual than that associated with humanist conceptions of the individual dominant in Western philosophy. While humanist conceptions of the individual – and all definitions of the individual in SLA research – presuppose that every person has an essential, unique, fixed, and coherent "core" (introvert/extrovert; motivated/unmotivated) poststructuralism depicts the individual – the subject – as diverse, contradictory, and dynamic – multiple rather than unitary, decentered rather than centered. Second, the conception of social identity as a *site of struggle* is an extension of the position that social identity is multiple and contradictory. Social identity is produced in a variety of social sites, all of which are structured by relations of power in which the person takes up different "subject positions" – teacher, child, feminist, manager, critic. The subject, in turn, is not conceived of as passive; he or she is conceived as both subject of and subject to relations of power within a particular site, community, and society: the subject has human agency. Thus the subject positions that a person takes up within a particular discourse are open to contestation: While a person may be positioned in a particular way within a given discourse, the person might resist the subject position, or even set up a counter-discourse which positions the person in a powerful rather than marginalized subject position. Third, in arguing that subjectivity or social identity is multiple, contradictory, and a site of struggle, feminist poststructuralism highlights the changing quality of a person's social identity. As Weedon (1987, p. 33) argues, "the political significance of decentring the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change." This is a crucial point for second language educators in that it opens up possibilities for educational intervention.

2.2 Refining language "competence"

Given the position that a language learner's social identity is produced and reproduced in day-to-day social interaction, my research develops questions I have raised in earlier research (Peirce 1989, 1990) about the normative views on communicative competence that have dominated the field of second language education for the past fifteen years (Hymes, 1971). Drawing on Bourdieu (1977) I take the position that the definition of competence should include the *right to speech* – what Bourdieu calls "the power to impose reception" (p. 75). His position is that the linguist (and I would argue, many applied linguists) take for granted the conditions for the establishment of communication: that those who speak regard those who listen as worthy to listen, and that those who listen regard those who speak as worthy to speak. However, as Bourdieu argues, it is precisely such assumptions that must be called into question. Bourdieu's (1977) notion of "legitimate discourse" is useful in helping me to explain why breakdowns in communication occurred between the immigrant women in my study, whom Bourdieu would describe as

"impostors" of the language, and anglophone Canadians, who would be considered "legitimate speakers" of English.

2.3 Rethinking "motivation"

Because, as Bourdieu argues, the right to speak and opportunities to speak intersect in important ways with social relations of power, I wish to problematize the concept of "motivation" with reference to the immigrant language learners in my study. In the field of second language learning, the concept of motivation is drawn primarily from the field of social psychology, where attempts have been made to quantify a learner's commitment to learning the target language. The work of Gardner and Lambert has been particularly influential in introducing the notions of "instrumental" and "integrative" motivation into the field of SLA. In their work, instrumental motivation references the desire that language learners have to learn a second language for utilitarian purposes, such as employment, while integrative motivation references the desire to learn a language to integrate successfully with the target language community.

Such conceptions of motivation, which are dominant in the field of SLA, do not capture the complex relationship between relations of power, identity, and language learning that I am investigating in my study of immigrant women. In my view, the concept of "investment " rather than "motivation" more accurately signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of the women to the target language, and their sometimes ambivalent desire to learn and practice it. The notion of investment I am advocating is not equivalent to "instrumental motivation". The conception of instrumental motivation presupposes a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical language learner who desires access to material resources that are the privilege of target language speakers. The notion of "investment", on the other hand, conceives of the language learner as having a complex social history and multiple desires. The notion presupposes that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world. Thus an "investment" in the target language is also an investment in a learner's own social identity, an identity which is constantly changing across time and space.

Comment: Thus far I have argued that the notion of the individual in SLA theory is problematic because SLA theorists have drawn artificial distinctions between the language learner and the social world, and have not addressed how relations of power structure opportunities for language learners to speak. I have drawn on Weedon to argue that social identity can be conceptualized as multiple, a site of struggle, and subject to change; I have drawn on Bourdieu to argue that definitions of communicative competence should include the right to speak; and I have argued that an understanding of a learner's "investment" in the target language may be a useful complement to concepts of motivation. I now wish to turn to my study of second language learners to demonstrate why this social theory can make a powerful contribution to SLA theory.

3. THE STUDY: Immigrant women as language learners

From January to June 1990 I taught a 6-month ESL course to a group of recent immigrants at Ontario College in Newtown, Canada. After the course was complete, I invited the learners to participate in a longitudinal case study of their language learning experiences in Canada. Five women agreed to participate in the study: Mai from Vietnam, Eva and Katarina from Poland, Felicia from Peru, and Martina from Czechoslovakia. The study lasted 12 months - from January to December 1991. A major source of data collection was what I called "the diary study". From January to June 1991, the women kept diaries of their language learning experiences in the home, workplace, and community, and we met in my home on a regular basis to discuss their insights and concerns. I also drew a substantial amount of data from two detailed questionnaires I administered before and after the study, as well as personal and group interviews, and home visits.

One of the assumptions on which I based my research questions was that practice in the target language is a necessary condition of second language learning. This view is summarized in two conditions Spolsky (1989) outlines in *Conditions for Second Language Learning*.
First, the more time spent learning any aspect of a second language, the more will be learned. Second, learning a language involves an opportunity for the new skills to be practiced; the result is fluency.

Exposure to the target language and practice in the target language are considered "necessary" conditions for second language learning: Learning cannot proceed without exposure and practice. These conditions, furthermore, are "graded": the more exposure and practice, the more proficient the learner will become. Spolsky (1989 p. 171) argues that the language learner can have exposure to and practice in the target language in two qualitatively different settings: the "natural" or informal environment of the target language community or the "formal" environment of the classroom. Because of the paucity of research on the natural language learning of adult immigrants, I chose to focus my research on the language learning experiences of the woman in their homes, workplaces, and communities. A central research question, which is the focus of this talk, was given as follows:

How can an enhanced understanding of natural language learning and social identity inform SLA theory?

4. THE ANALYSIS: Identity, Power, and Language Learning

Although the findings from my study are extensive (Peirce, 1993), I wish to highlight data that addresses the relationship between language learning and social identity. First, I will address how the notion of investment helps to explain the contradictions between the women's motivation to learn English, and their sometimes ambivalent desire to speak it. Second, I highlight data from one of the participants - Martina - to analyse the relationship between investment, social identity, and language learning. Third, I

use an extract from Eva's data to help defend the argument that sharp distinctions cannot be made between the language learner and the social world. The data helps to illustrate that language learning is a social practice that must be understood within – and not apart from – the context of larger, and frequently inequitable social processes. All names have been changed to protect the identities of the participants.

4.1 From motivation to "investment"

All the participants in the study were highly motivated to learn English. They all took extra courses to learn English; they all participated in the diary study; they all wished to have more social contact with anglophone Canadians; and all of them, except Martina, indicated that they felt comfortable speaking to friends or people they knew well. It is significant, however, that all the women felt uncomfortable talking to people *in whom they had a particular symbolic or material investment.* Mai, who had great investment in her job and the financial independence it gave her, said that she was most uncomfortable speaking to her "boss". Katarina, who had a great investment in her status as a professional (she had an MSc), felt most uncomfortable talking to her teacher, the doctor, and other anglophone professionals. Felicia, who had great investment in her Peruvian identity, felt most uncomfortable speaking English in front of Peruvians who spoke English fluently. Despite being highly motivated, there were particular social conditions under which the women in my study were most uncomfortable and unlikely to speak. The data suggests that a language learner's motivation to speak is mediated by investments that may conflict with the desire to speak – investments that are intimately connected to the ongoing production of the learner's social identity. This position will be defended more comprehensively in the following discussion of Martina's experiences of learning English in Canada.

4.2 Reconceptualizing the individual: Martina, the Courageous Mother

Comment: I have called Martina "the courageous mother". It is important to note that in framing Martina's social identity as a "courageous mother" I am not creating a cast-iron identity for her. Rather, I seek to capture those aspects of her social identity that appear relevant for understanding how she created and responded to opportunities to practice English.

Martina was born in Czechoslovakia in 1952. She came to Canada in March 1989 when she was 37 years old, with her husband Petr and their three children (Jana 17, Elsbet 14, Milos 11 at the time). She came to Canada for a *"better life for children"*. Neither she nor her husband knew any English before they came to Canada, but her children had received some English language training in Austria where the family had spent 19 months waiting for Canadian visas. Although Martina had a professional degree as a surveyor, she worked as a "cook help" at a restaurant, Fast Foods, before she started the ESL course (June, 1990).

Initially, Martina was dependent on her children to perform the necessary tasks of settling into Canada. When Martina went looking for a job, she took her eldest daughter with her, even though her daughter would cry because nobody wanted to employ her mother. When Martina wanted to help serve

customers at Fast Foods, she asked her daughters to tell her what words to use. As Martina's English improved, she took on more of the public and private tasks of settling into a new country. In general, she could not rely on her husband Petr for support. It was Martina who did most of the organization in the family, like finding accommodation, organizing telephones, buying appliances, finding schools for the children. Martina also helped her husband to perform public tasks in English. When Petr was laid off work, he relied on Martina to help him get unemployment insurance and he asked Martina to help him prepare for his plumber's certificate by translating the preparation book from English to Czech.

I wish to argue that Martina's investment in English was largely structured by her identity as primary caregiver in the family. First, she wanted to learn English so that she could take over the professional and domestic tasks for which her children had initially taken responsibility. The very reason why Martina and Petr came to Canada was to find a *"better life for children"*. Martina was anxious not to jeopardize the children's future by having them take on more parental tasks than were absolutely necessary. Second, because Martina had the responsibility for dealing with the public world, she was also anxious to understand the Canadian way of life – how things *"get done"* in Canadian society.

The poststructuralist view that social identity is nonunitary and contradictory helps to explain how Martina responded to and created opportunities to practice English. On the one hand, Martina frequently referred to herself as *"stupid"* and *"inferior"* because she could not speak English fluently. She said she was *"stupid"* for directing a telephone installer to the kitchen when he requested the use of the bathroom; she was *"stupid"* because she worked for $4 an hour as a kitchen help; she was *"inferior"* because she was not able to speak English fluently. On the other hand, however, despite feelings of inferiority and shame, despite what could be described as a high "affective filter" Martina refused to be silenced. Consider, for example, the following extract from her diary of March 8, 1991:

> The first time I was very nervous and afraid to talk on the phone. When the phone rang, everybody in my family was busy, and my daughter had to answer it. After ESL course when we moved and our landlords tried to persuade me that we have to pay for whole year, I got upset and I talked with him on the phone over one hour and I didn't think about the tenses rules. I had known that I couldn't give up. My children were very surpriced when they heard me.

I suggest that Martina's perseverance (*"I couldn't give up"*) and her courage to challenge linguistic rules of use that limited possibilities for herself and her family intersect with her social identity as a mother in two ways. First, as a primary caregiver, she had to deal with the public world and defend the family's rights against unscrupulous social practices. Martina had to do this herself, regardless of her command of the English tense system, the strange looks she received from her interlocutors, and her feelings of inferiority. Second, Martina drew on her symbolic resources as a mother to reframe the power relations between herself and her coworkers. Thus, instead of conceding to their power as legitimate speakers of English who had the power to demand obedience of "impostors" of the language, she reframed

their relationship as a domestic one in which, as "children" they had no authority over her, as a "parent". Consider the following extract taken from an interview with Martine on March 17, 1991:

> In restaurant was working a lot of children, but the children always thought that I am - I don't know - maybe some broom or something. They always said "Go and clean the living room". And I was washing the dishes and they didn't do nothing. They talked to each other and they thought that I had to do everything. And I said "No." The girl is only 12 years old. She is younger than my son. I said "No, you are doing nothing. You can go and clean the tables or something"

Martine's social identity was a site of struggle. She was an immigrant woman, a language learner, a kitchen help. But she was also a mother, a wife, and a primary caregiver. By setting up a counter-discourse in her workplace and resisting the subject position "immigrant woman" in favour of the subject position "mother" Martine claimed the right to speak.

4.3 Integrating the language learner and the social world

I have argued thus far that the poststructuralist conception of social identity as multiple and a site of struggle cannot be understood apart from the participants' investment in the target language and the way they created, responded to, and sometimes resisted opportunities to speak English. I now wish to focus on data that provides a convincing illustration of the argument that sharp distinctions should not be made between the language learner and the social world. Drawing on this data, I argue that language learning is a social practice that is intimately connected to social relations of power between speakers. Consider the extract from Eva's diary on February 8, 1991.

> Everybody working with me is Canadian. When I started to work there, they couldn't understand that it might be difficould for me to understand everthing and know about everthing what it's normal for them. To explain it more clearly I can write an example which happened few days ago.
>
> The girl which is working with me pointed at the man and said:
>
> "Do you see him?" - I said
>
> "Yes, Why?
>
> "Don't you know him?"
>
> "No. I don't know him."
>
> "How come you don't know him. Don't you watch TV. That's Bart Simpson."
>
> It made me feel so bad and I didn't answer her nothing. Until now I don't know why this person was important.

The extract illustrates that a breakdown in communication has occurred in Eva's workplace. Eva's coworker, Gail, has initiated a conversation with Eva, the topic of which is "Bart Simpson", an icon of popular culture in North America. When Eva admits that she has no knowledge of this television character, Gail's response is accusing: *"How come you don't know him."* Eva is silenced by Gail's response. Although Eva is eager to interact with anglophones, practice her English, and enhance her language learning, she resists the opportunity to speak. In an interview on March 7, 1991, I asked Eva why she had not responded to Gail. Eva explained that she had felt humiliated at the time. As she said, *"'You don't watch TV?' And I felt 'What are you doing?' I was thinking like 'This strange woman'."*

This data provides a powerful illustration of the relationship between the individual language learner, the larger social context, and language learning. Language learning is not just an abstract skill, but a practice that is socially constructed in the hegemonic events, practices, and processes that constitute daily life. When Eva admits her ignorance of Bart Simpson, she is positioned as someone who is *"strange"*, someone who does not have the cultural knowledge that is "commonsense" in the workplace. Gail's subject position is that of "knower" – and it is that knowledge that gives her power. Significantly, because Eva does not have access to that cultural knowledge, she is silenced.

I suggest that the reason why the breakdown in communication between Gail and Eva occurred was because Eva had been exposed as an "imposter" (in Bourdieu's terms). Because Eva did not have the knowledge that Gail assumed she should have, Eva was positioned as an illegitimate receiver of Gail's utterance. Significantly, as soon as Gail recognized that Eva was an impostor, she brought closure to the conversation. Note that Gail's question to Eva was rhetorical – she did not expect, or possibly even desire a response from Eva. *"How come you don't know him. Don't you watch TV. That's Bart Simpson."* I suggest that what made Eva feel *"bad"* was being exposed as an impostor – a person "strange" to legitimate discourse. Because Eva accepted the subject position "impostor", she could not claim the right to speak.

Thus while Eva had been offered the opportunity to engage in social interaction, to "practice" her English, her subject position within the larger discourse of which she and Gail were a part undermined this opportunity: *"It made me feel so bad and I didn't answer her nothing."* This discourse must be understood not only in relation to the words that were said, but in relationship to larger, inequitable structures within the workplace, and Canadian society at large, in which immigrant language learners are generally considered illegitimate speakers of English. In her diary Eva describes how she was sent off to do the menial jobs in the restaurant so that the other workers could continue their conversations without her, further denying her the opportunity to engage in social interaction and practice her English. As Eva wrote in her diary of February 8, 1991, *"They takes advantage of me, because they know that I wouldn't say anything. I tried talk to them few times, but for them it's better to send me somewhere, to do something."* Bourdieu (1977, p. 648) makes the point that the "most radical, surest, and best hidden censorships are those which exclude certain individuals from communication."

Given this larger social context, it comes as little surprise that Eva *"didn't answer her nothing"* when Gail positioned Eva as ignorant in the Bart Simpson exchange. Because of the construction of Eva's social identity in Canada as "immigrant", the social meaning of Gail's words to her were understood by Eva in this context. Had Eva been, for example, an anglophone Canadian who endorsed public rather than commercial television, or perhaps no television at all, she could have set up a counter-discourse to Gail's utterance, *resisting* being positioned as a potentially legitimate receiver of Gail's utterance. She could, for example, have said, "I don't like commercial television." However, because of the unequal relations of power between Gail and Eva, it was Gail who could determine the grounds on which legitimate discourse was to be determined.

5. CONCLUSION: SLA Theory Revisited

In a recent edition of TESOL Quarterly, Sevignon (1991, p. 271) made the following statement, "No researcher today would dispute that language learning results from participation in communicative events. Despite any claims to the contrary, however, the nature of this learning remains undefined." In this paper I have suggested that SLA theorists have struggled to define the nature of natural language learning because they have drawn artificial distinctions between the individual language learning and the larger social context. I have drawn on my data to argue that motivation, extroversion, and confidence are not fixed personality traits, but must be understood with reference to social relations of power that create the possibilities for language learners to speak. I have drawn on Martina's data to argue that even when learners have a high "affective filter", it is their *investment* in the target language that will lead them to speak. This investment, in turn, must be understood in relation to the multiple and contradictory identity of the language learner. I have drawn on Eva's data to argue that language learning is a complex social practice that must be understood in relation to inequitable structures of power in the social world. We should not take for granted that those who speak regard those who listen as worthy to listen, and that those who listen regard those who speak as worthy to speak.

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